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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000644

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE "ARMENIAN ISSUE" IN ISTANBUL

¶1. (C) Summary: Most of those Turks we have spoken with in Istanbul are largely ignorant of the tragic fate of at least hundreds of thousands of Armenians who were killed in 1894-5 and especially in 1915-16 throughout Anatolia toward the end of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish history books and readily available academic literature fail to address the subject, leaving Turks without an objective context to evaluate the claims leveled by the Armenian Diaspora. As a result, such charges and the consequent international demands for Turkey to "recognize" the 1915 deaths as a "genocide" are merely dismissed by Istanbul Turks as part of a hostile propaganda campaign and a prelude to demands for "compensation." A "Genocide Resolution" from the U.S. Congress would be greeted with public outrage and would strengthen anti-Americanism.
End Summary.

How does the average Istanbul Turk see the Armenian issue?

¶2. (U) We have spoken to a number of Istanbul Turks over the last several weeks in an effort to get a better sense of the range of opinion on this issue. The subject appears to have been largely ignored in the Turkish history books and most have only a very dim understanding of what happened to the Armenians in 1915-16. To the extent that Turks here have a historical understanding of the events, it is in the context of the invasions and uprisings that threatened the Ottoman Empire. For most, however, the issue has come to their attention only as the result of what they see as a hostile propaganda campaign by the Armenian Diaspora -- the same Diaspora that earlier spawned a terrorist organization that assassinated 34 Turkish diplomats in the 1970s and 1980s, including several in the United States. Predictably, for a population that is still mainly inward-looking and reflexively nationalistic, each new development in this international campaign provokes howls of protest here in Istanbul.

Is the so-called Armenian "genocide" still taboo?

¶3. (C) In the past, Turkish authorities actively restricted what could be written or said on this and other subjects, but in recent years such restrictions have eased. As an example, Hrant Dink, the editor of Turkey's only Armenian-language newspaper, Agos, told poloff that in the last few years three separate books that dealt with the subject were banned after publication. One of the publishers spent six months in prison as a result. But when the cases were taken to court, all of the charges were dismissed and the bans were lifted. Dink speculated that Turkish authorities have realized that these cases merely generate undesirable publicity while simply ignoring these publications consigns them to the dusty back shelves of bookstores and libraries.

How would Turks in Istanbul react to a "Genocide" resolution?

¶4. (C) The almost universal response from average Turks here would be outrage and would be reflected strongly in the mass media. Beyond that, however, both Hrant Dink and Ilter Turkmen (former Foreign Minister and Turkish Coordinator of the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission) asked, "what more could Turkey do?" A few even suggested that it might be better to go ahead and get it out of the way, rather than endure the annual suspenseful ritual of waiting to see whether the Congress will pass it or not. Most, however, worry that such a development would aggravate a continuing anti-American, anti-Western current of public opinion and would have negative long-term repercussions. Similarly, each year Istanbul Turks nervously await the U.S. President's April 24 statement, judging it largely by the simple measure of whether or not it uses the "g-word."

What are the prospects for reconciliation with Armenia?

¶5. (C) This is obviously an issue that rests in the hands of the government in Ankara. Those we have spoken to here are not hopeful that there will be much progress. Turkmen expressed his frustration, saying that he had pushed Ankara, unsuccessfully, to unilaterally open the border with Armenia.

Turkmen blamed those in the mid-to-senior ranks of the Foreign Ministry, arguing that they have a narrow, nationalistic mindset that makes it impossible for them to see the way forward on this issue. Turkmen told poloff that the Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission had achieved only very limited progress and would need to be changed before it could continue its work. Dink, too, expressed frustration with the government for not opening the border ("Even the border between northern and southern Cyprus has been opened..."). Conceding that the Justice and Development (AK) Party government has had a lot on its plate (i.e., EU accession, Cyprus, Iraq) since coming to power last November, Dink held out little hope that they would be able to do much with Armenia.

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